

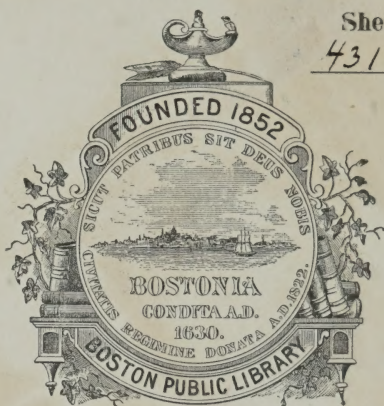
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THE
AMBULANCE SYSTEM.

REPRINTED FROM THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW,
JANUARY, 1864.

AND

PUBLISHED, FOR GRATUITOUS DISTRIBUTION, BY THE COMMITTEE OF
CITIZENS WHO HAVE IN CHARGE THE SENDING OF PETI-
TIONS TO CONGRESS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
A THOROUGH AND UNIFORM AMBULANCE
SYSTEM IN THE ARMIES OF
THE REPUBLIC.

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F. G. Palfrey

BOSTON:
CROSBY AND NICHOLS, *c*
117 WASHINGTON STREET.
1864.

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PREFATORY REMARKS.

THE Committee of Citizens in favor of having a proper Ambulance System established in the armies of the republic have published, for gratuitous distribution, the accompanying article, taken from that able and long-established journal, the North American Review.

It was written by a gentleman of Massachusetts, alike a scholar and a soldier. He has won honorable wounds in this sacred war. His opinion, namely, that of one who has commanded a New England regiment in the field, and therefore knows whereof he speaks, is entitled to the highest respect. It will be seen that he presents the subject, in some points of view, less *positively* than the Committee would have done. It is most opportune in this respect at the present moment, when, as we learn from the journals of the day, the honorable Senator, Mr. Wilson of Massachusetts, has already introduced an Ambulance Bill into the Senate, and it has been referred to the Military Committee of that body. From all that can be gleaned from the meagre accounts given, that bill is a great advance, in its details and its general application to the national forces, beyond any previously existing. It seems to contain all, or almost all, the essentials necessary for the thorough working of an Ambulance Department.

The Committee hail, with great pleasure, this action on the part of Mr. Wilson, but they would most earnestly beg of their fellow-citizens not to relax their efforts, nor to send one petition less to Congress. On the contrary, now, and until Con-

gress fairly acts upon the subject, is the most appropriate season for pouring in petitions upon the national Senators and Representatives. It will be remembered that already two bills, referred to the same Military Committee, have been lost. Let not the third, proposed as it is by the Chairman of that Committee, be left to die for want of a proper display of interest in the subject on the part of the people. Let, therefore, petitions go up from every portion of the loyal North, if need be, until Congress adjourns, or until every object wished for be obtained.

These objects, in the opinion of the Committee, should be as follows:—

1. The solution of the problem, How most speedily and most tenderly to remove a wounded soldier from the spot where he has fallen, to the stretcher, the ambulance, the field hospital, the permanent hospital, and finally to his regiment, or, if need be, to his own home.

2. On the broad grounds of an advanced civilization, to urge on Congress the propriety of taking the position before the nations of the earth, that military surgeons, and their assistants, the men of an ambulance corps, while engaged in their sacred calling, should not be held as proper objects of mark for the sharpshooters of an enemy; nor, if they by chance should fall into the enemy's hands, should they be held as prisoners of war, but as soldiers under parole, and just as inviolate in their persons, their personal property, and the property necessarily incident to their employment, as while under the folds of a flag of truce.

THE AMBULANCE SYSTEM.

Report on the Art of War in Europe in 1854, 1855, and 1856. BY COLONEL R. DELAFIELD, U. S. A. and Major of the Corps of Engineers, *from his Notes and Observations made as a Member of a "Military Commission to the Theatre of War in Europe," under the Orders of the HON. JEFFERSON DAVIS, Secretary of War.* Washington : George W. Bowman, Printer. 1861.

It is not our purpose in this article to express any opinion upon the merits of this great compilation of the results of an accomplished soldier's observation. We propose to make some remarks upon the Ambulance System established in the armies of the United States, and we find in Colonel Delafield's Report important illustrations of our subject in his account of the experience of the Allied armies in the Crimea, in regard to the Ambulance System in use during the Crimean war. The Report also contains descriptions and drawings of the most approved ambulances, stretchers, and other appurtenances of the train, adopted by the French, English, Russian, and other European armies at the time when it was prepared. We quote two paragraphs, from which a satisfactory notion may be gathered of the general scope of an Ambulance System.

"Many arrangements were made by the Allies during this campaign about Sebastopol for moving the wounded from the field of battle to the ambulances, stationed near the columns of attack, thence to the camp or field hospitals, and finally, as health permitted, to the general hospitals near Constantinople.

"The important elements in effecting this were, first, the earliest possible attention to the wounded on or nearest to the field of battle. Next, the most expeditious means of transport, with least number of animals, wagons, attendants, combining the greatest comfort to the wounded soldier ; and then such means of transport as could be used on any battle-

field, whether in the bottom of a ditch, or a steep descent of a ravine, over ploughed, stony, or other rough ground, still securing ease and greatest comfort to the wounded." — p. 68.

To give the earliest possible attention to the wounded on the field, to move them thence to the ambulances, and so to the field hospitals, and from them, as health permits, to the general hospitals near our military centres, and all with the greatest possible comfort to the sufferer, — these are duties of the American people to the American soldier.

It is close upon fifty years since the world last witnessed war upon a continental scale, and the land in which we live has not been the theatre of war for about the same period. When the Rebellion broke out, we were a people accustomed to peace, but not without some knowledge of war. Our military system was good, but all our military habits and traditions were those which attach to a small army. The necessity of calling to arms large bodies of men was felt at once, and at once acceded to. The work we had taken in hand proved too hard for our original levies, and we have sent forward great and frequent reinforcements. The newspapers have lately published a statement of the number of *corps d'armée* in the field. There can, therefore, be no objection to saying that we have on foot twenty corps, composed of infantry and artillery, besides cavalry, and it is probably within bounds to say that these twenty corps number three hundred thousand men, while the number of men enlisted in the military service of the United States since the war began, is estimated by some calculators at more than a million. It is true that these great masses of men have known long periods of inactivity. It is no less true that, at other periods, battle has followed battle with almost unexampled rapidity. In the year 1862, the Army of the Potomac alone was engaged in seventeen battles and two sieges, and this number does not include the affairs and skirmishes which were so frequent, especially before Yorktown and before Richmond, nor the lesser battles of the Seven Days. It is difficult to make so much as an approximation to the number of Northern soldiers wounded in a single year, or in a single army; still more difficult, if we extend the estimate to all our armies, and to the time since the war began. It is matter of only too general knowledge that our wounded have been counted, not by thou-

sands, but by tens of thousands. In the battles of Gettysburg alone, General Meade officially reports that near fourteen thousand of our men were wounded. The names of other great battles, fought in the East and the West, with their fearful lists of wounded, are familiar to the memories of a sorrowing people. And these almost countless sufferers are not all who need the services of the ambulance train. In the cold of winter and the heat of summer, on plains which the abundant Southern rains convert to sloughs, in fever-stricken swamps, amid the rank vegetation that springs around poisonous bayous and lagoons, our soldiers have sickened in numbers that we are not likely to over-estimate, and they, as well as the wounded, require to be moved "to the camp or field-hospitals, and finally, as health permits, to the general hospitals," in a manner "securing ease and greatest comfort" to them.

In such circumstances as these, it is evident that it is the duty of the government and its officials, civil, military, and medical, to do everything in their power to insure the faithful observance of the duties incident to the Ambulance System as established in the armies of the United States. But this is not all. The government ought not to content itself with a mere amplification of the old system, or with one made by the gradual adoption of such improvements as suggest themselves to individuals from time to time. The people will not be satisfied with any system other than the best one attainable. If the present system be radically bad, it ought to be given up. If good upon the whole, but defective in parts, those defects ought to be remedied. On the other hand, if it be the best attainable, then it ought to be approved by competent authority, so as to commend it to the confidence of thousands of patriotic hearts, which are now distressed by honest doubts of its fitness for the ends it has in view.

It is not likely that any one will be disposed to deny that the American people can have a system as perfect as man can devise, if it make up its mind to have such a one. Its ingenuity and general aptness are acknowledged. In carrying on one of the greatest wars of modern times, we have proved ourselves capable of teaching the Old World many lessons. We must not content ourselves with displaying to Europe our capacity of destroying. While our long lines of men are advancing

through country that swamp and mountain combine to make almost impassable, and while our mailed monitors by sea and our great guns by land are bearing and doing such things that the records read like tales of magic, we may well be proud to show that the God of destruction does not absorb the worship of our warring people. Let us show that, while our Northern blood still flows warmly in the veins of a brave and manly race, we have learned to turn a ready ear to the voice of humanity, calling to us to save and to heal. Let us assure the soldier in the field, and his anxious family at home, that everything that ingenuity and liberality can do is done to secure to him, when wounded or ill, the speediest and most efficient aid that it is in the power of his fellow-men to afford.

And while we recognize the justice of the claim of the soldier, there are circumstances which make it less than usually difficult, and therefore especially incumbent upon us, to attend to it, and see that it is granted. The vast war we are waging, while it has brought so much poverty and privation to our enemies, has not pressed heavily upon us, in a material point of view. Certain interests have suffered in the loyal States, but, upon the whole, those States are extremely prosperous. The government has all the money it needs, and the abundance of money in the hands of private citizens is illustrated by the magnitude and frequency of their contributions to all the funds for patriotic uses. Moreover, we are in a situation peculiarly favorable to efficient attention to this matter, by reason of our nearness to the principal fields of battle. It is not with us as it was when we sent our troops to Mexico, nor as it was with England and France when they sent their troops to the Crimea. Washington, and the populous cities of the seaboard, are behind Meade, and, when the Federal commander delivers battle on the plains of Manassas, the sound of his cannon is heard on the pleasant hills that look down upon the Chain Bridge, and on the broad steps of the Capitol. Cincinnati is behind Grant, and with it all the comfort and abundance of the Western States. New Orleans and the fleet are behind Banks. The fact that we are prosperous and near our armies does not make more imperative the duty of supplying all their needs; but if we neglect to do so, it makes that neglect more shameful for us.

We have already alluded to the existence of a popular mistrust of the present ambulance system. Many of our readers must be aware, that for some months past a discussion of its merits has been going on in the public prints, which has, to a certain extent, assumed the form of controversy. We do not propose, in this article, to take part in that controversy. It is sufficient for our purpose to establish the fact that there exists, among persons whose opinions command respect, a grave difference of opinion as to the merits of the present system. This is amply proved by the publication, on the one hand, by the chairman of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs, of emphatic approval of it, and, on the other, by a gentleman of eminent worth, scientific attainments, and well-known zeal in all matters of philanthropy, of equally emphatic disapproval. This is not all. Our journals contain a statement of the actual existence of "a difference of opinion about the perfection and usefulness of the Ambulance System of the United States Army," followed by the suggestion of a petition to Congress on the subject; and to this are appended the names of many men of the highest standing among us, and at the head of them all the name of the Governor of this Commonwealth. The drawing and signing of such a petition prove that men's minds are not satisfied upon the subject to which it relates.

It is generally admitted that the army of the Potomac is the best appointed army that the loyal States have sent into the field. In that army, the two-wheeled ambulance for one horse, and the four-wheeled ambulance for two horses, are, or lately were, in use. We believe that no man who has once ridden in the two-wheeled ambulance would willingly get into one again, even if he were well. As for the four-wheeled ambulance, it is within our personal knowledge that a soldier in our army, ill, but unwounded, lying at full length on the *fore and aft* seat or bed with which it is fitted, had to hold on with both hands to keep from falling to the floor. This was on roads in Maryland, not far from Washington. Every soldier knows that, in the neighborhood of large armies, corduroy roads are in constant use, and knows what it must be to ride over corduroy roads when ill or wounded, in a vehicle in which, when running on an earth road, both hands are needed to keep the passenger from falling. And after a battle, there are few

among the tenants of ambulances who have the use of both hands left them.

Our ambulances, uncomfortable as they are, are otherwise insufficient for the purposes for which they are required. What Colonel Delafield writes of the ambulances used by the Allies in the Crimea is equally true of ours.

“None of these ambulances were found suitable for all cases on the field of battle and its vicinity. The requisites for an ambulance should be such as to adapt it to the battle-field, among the dead, wounded, and dying, — in ploughed fields, on hill-tops, mountain slopes, in siege batteries and trenches, and a variety of places inaccessible to wheel-carriages, of which woods, thick brush, and rocky ground are frequently the localities most obstinately defended, and where most soldiers are left for the care of the surgeons. These difficulties were felt in a great degree by all the armies allied against Russia in the siege of Sebastopol, and the consequence was, that the English, French, and Sardinian armies adopted finally, in part or altogether, *pack mules, carrying litters or chairs*. The careful and sure-footed mule can wind its way over any road or trail, among the dead, dying, and wounded on any battle-field, as well as in the trench and siege battery. It required but suitable arrangements to support the wounded upon the mule’s or horse’s back to attain the desired object, and this the allied armies finally accomplished and put in practice.” — p. 73.

“One hundred and sixteen chairs and litters were in use, and sufficed to transport all the wounded from the sanguinary battle-field of Inkerman in a very short time after the action terminated.” — p. 74.

We have never known or heard of the use of such chairs and litters in any of our armies. If they have not been adopted, the propriety of adopting them seems a question worthy, at the least, of attentive consideration. We have the experience of the Allies to guide us, and in following it we should be acting on something more substantial than theory. Even though we admit that our ambulances are better, if they are at hand, it is unfortunately seldom that they are at hand. Every soldier of experience knows that in the majority of cases the roads to the front, at the time of an engagement, are too full to admit of the passage of ambulances till after painful delay. When our armies advance to battle, it almost always happens that they have to cross rivers, by bridges or fords, or to make their way through swamps and forests, by roads hastily and imperfectly

made, or by no roads, through ploughed fields, across fences, over hills. The infantry, the arm that more than any other can take care of itself, goes first. Then comes the artillery, as soon as there is infantry enough in position to take care of it. Behind the infantry and artillery come the heavy ammunition-wagons; for, if the action be sharp, it does not take long to empty the cartridge-boxes and to use the extra rounds carried loose in the pockets of the men, or to empty the boxes on the limbers and caissons of the batteries. Hospital wagons, with medical and surgical supplies, must soon be at hand, and very often it happens that rations fall short, and wagons filled with food for the hungry soldiers must approach; and, all the time, such roads as there may be in the rear of the line of battle are apt to be crowded with reinforcements arriving, or with troops of either arm changing position. The first duty is to win the battle, for that alone insures the most efficient attention to the wounded, and so the ambulances have to wait. But wherever men can go mules can go, and the length of a marching column would not be seriously increased by the addition of two or three pairs of mules to each regiment. There is another consideration in favor of their use, in preference to ambulances, when roads are crowded. Every wagon must have a space equal to the length of its axle from hub to hub. But just as men "undouble files," so may mules fall into single line. The number we have mentioned, with litters and chairs, would be enough to render most important service to any force engaged. Men with the severest wounds, elsewhere than in their legs and those parts which are called vital, can ordinarily, or at least very often, walk to the rear themselves, and a very few mules would be enough for the transportation of the rest. They would also be far safer than ambulances, as they would be so little of a target for the enemy. After a few discharges of cannon,

"The ranks are rolled in vapor,"

and it is hard to see the enemy. It is not attributing inhumanity to the Southern artillerists to say that, if they caught sight of any object in the cloud of smoke into which they were firing, they would be exceedingly likely to assume the presence there of our men, and to train their pieces upon it.

More than this, the evil of volunteered assistance to wounded

comrades would be greatly diminished if mules were present in battle, with their litters and drivers. In loosely disciplined regiments this evil has prevailed to a degree that has most seriously diminished their effective force. Men who, under proper training, would make capital soldiers, are too little in dread of their officers and too much in dread of the enemy to stay in their places under a sharp fire, when they see a chance to get to the rear without open display of cowardice, and perhaps with a salvo to their consciences as doing a humane act. We have seen six men, when men were needed, attending one wounded man to the rear. All these volunteer Samaritans should have been in their places helping to win the battle, and their unworthy officers, who weakly let them go, would perhaps have been men enough to keep them in their places, had they known that others were behind them ready and able to care for the wounded, — ready, like the ambulance-men of the first Napoleon, to rush straight into the fighting, and carry off the wounded from the feet of the combatants. These same Samaritans, experience has proved, rarely return to the battle from which they have been led by promptings of terror assuming the guise of humanity.

Though we entertain a pretty strong opinion that the wheeled ambulances in use in our armies are very imperfect machines, and an equally strong one that the use of mules with litters and chairs would be a most valuable addition to ambulances, even of the most perfect construction, we do not undertake to go any further than to say what we know, as a contribution to the general stock of information on the subject, and as a means, if it may be, of leading to some more satisfactory action on the subject than has yet been taken. And as we have spoken of the vehicles in use, so we shall speak of the men. The subject is far from being a simple one. The present system, as regards the men, may or may not be radically bad. It is certain that there are grave defects in it. But we confess that it would be a difficult task to suggest an altogether satisfactory substitute. Let us see, in a general way, what the system is, and how it works. In the army of the Potomac, and in the Department of the Gulf, the system of *detail* prevails. It is probable that the same is true of other armies. A certain number of men are taken from each regiment and attached to the ambulance train.

They are officered by a captain and lieutenants, also detailed. This is the organization for a corps. The captain is attached to the staff of the major-general commanding the corps, and lives at his head-quarters. We use the present tense. This was, no very long time ago, the case in Virginia and Louisiana, and we have not heard of any substantial change.

This system must be either good or bad. It must work either well or ill. Instead of pronouncing an opinion on the subject, let us suggest to our readers to ask all such intelligent officers as they may chance to meet, what personal knowledge they have of the existence and working of the system, and what opinion they have formed of its efficiency. There is one objection to the detailing system, of almost universal application. It is that, when officers are called on for details for detached service, they almost invariably detail their poorest men. People who have not seen service can hardly form an adequate idea of the reluctance with which officers part with good men. Many things combine to originate and strengthen this feeling. In the first place, there is the strong feeling of pride which every worthy officer feels in having his company full, and full of good men. Then, as his experience grows, he sees how greatly his daily comfort, and, when there is fighting, his chances of success and consequent distinction, are increased by his having good men under him. So, when an order comes for a detail for the quartermaster, or head-quarters, or the ambulances, his impulse is to pick out the man who is less neat than his fellows in camp, less prompt at roll-calls, less handy on drill, less quiet after taps, — the man who loiters or straggles on the march, — the man who needs constant watchfulness to keep him from going to the rear when the company is under fire. The ambulance train should include no men who do not at least equal the best of the fighting-men in gallantry; for they may have to go under hot fire without the support that comes from the “shoulder to shoulder” of the line, and the pressure of the file-closers behind, and without the excitement of bearing and using arms. It should be made up of men strong enough to carry their end of a stretcher with ease, and of men who are rather over than under the average in matter of humanity, as, from the nature of their employment, they must act in great measure without the immediate

supervision of officers. We again suggest to our readers to ask the officers and soldiers of their acquaintance whether or no they have found the men of the ambulance corps in our armies a plucky, vigorous, humane set of men ; and whether they think that a set of men obtained by special enlistment for ambulance service would be more or less efficient than detailed men. It would do no harm to extend the inquiry, and to ask in what estimation those officers are held who seek employment with the ambulances, in exchange for their legitimate business, and to what estimation the subsequent conduct of such officers usually entitles them. With such sources of information within easy reach, it is not worth while to collect and print the common stories of ambulance-drivers taking for their own use at night the stretchers on which their feeble passengers should have slept, or of their fright at the rumored approach of the enemy, and the necessity of the production of pistols by wounded officers to prevent the drivers from abandoning them by the roadside. We desire to get at the truth, and in no way can it be more readily and surely reached than by the general use of such inquiries as we have mentioned.

We incline to think it probable that, by special enlistments for the ambulance service, a class of men might be obtained more likely to perform their duties faithfully than those obtained from the rank and file by detail. Experience has proved, we think, that many men are willing to devote themselves to the relief of their fellow-men, and to do so in cases where a high degree of self-sacrifice is required, who would not be willing to shoulder a musket and enter the ranks ; and many, it is likely, would be fit for the one duty who would be physically incapable of the other. We offer this as a suggestion merely. The gentlemen connected with the Sanitary Commission would, it is likely, be especially able to express an opinion upon the probabilities of success in adopting the system of special enlistments.

It may also be remarked, that, should such a system be adopted, it would not necessarily exclude the employment of individuals taken from the rank and file. Men of approved gallantry, certified by the surgeons to be of sufficient vigor for the duties of their new situation, but unfit for the constant exposure of picket duty in all sorts of weather, might be

transferred to the ambulance corps, and do good service in it. Their duties, on a great majority of the days of the year, would be lighter than those of the soldier. He must face all weathers, by night and by day, and constantly sleep on the ground, with nothing over him but his blanket. The ambulance man would have many and many a good night's sleep, while his friend in the ranks stood on guard with the rain dripping from his soaked cap and coat. His food would be more regular, from his vicinity to the train, and it would seldom happen, even at the worst times, that he could not find some shelter at night by crawling under an ambulance. But whatever the system, whether that of detail or special enlistment, the men of the ambulance corps should be stimulated by the hope of rewards, and restrained by the fear of punishment. No coward should be tolerated among them; no act of neglect or inhumanity should go unnoticed; no instance of distinguished gallantry should fail to meet its recompense. It will be a glad day for the American army when the government decides to grant decorations, the strongest incentive, the best reward, of the soldier. Until that time, so unfortunately long in coming, increase of rank and pay by promotion, which can come to comparatively few, is the only prize which our defenders can hope to gain.

We trust that the day is not far distant when the country will be satisfied that the best possible ambulance system has been adopted and put in force. The horrors inseparable from war are enough. We should make every effort so to order affairs that all unnecessary horrors shall be done away with. Great accessions to our armies are soon to be made. Those levies will probably not be used in active operations till the spring. There is plenty of time before that for doing whatever should be done for the ambulance system. The people are not satisfied with it. The army is still less satisfied with it. We urge that one of two things should be done. If the system be defective, it should be changed or improved. If it be the best attainable, it should be approved by the deliberate action of Congress, either by the direct action of that body or by the report of a commission made up of the best-informed and ablest of the military and medical officers not otherwise on duty.

Should such a commission be appointed, there is a matter, beside the general system, which would well deserve their attention, and that is, the question whether it would not be possible to enter into something like an agreement with our enemies to consider the ambulance-men as neutrals, and admit them to the field after a battle. It is true that many difficulties would attend such a scheme, but they may, perhaps, not be insuperable. The spirit manifested by the high civil officers of the Confederate government is discouraging to any hope of the kind, but the humanity of their prominent generals, of which we have many proofs, is in favor of it. When the advantage gained by one side is decisive, there seems to be reason to believe that the victors might admit to the field the train of their opponents, under proper restrictions, not only without loss to themselves, but with the positive gain of escaping so far from the necessity of caring for the severely wounded of the enemy. When the battle is drawn, either side may well object to the admission of any one connected with its opponents to the neutral ground which separates the pickets. Generals object, at such times, to sending or receiving flags. But, though circumstances might often make it impossible to enjoy the benefit of any such convention, yet, whenever it was otherwise, the gain would be unspeakable. It is possible that experiment might diminish the force of the objections to such liberty, and use might beget in each side a greater readiness to improve it. If the thing be feasible, the advantages incident to it would be incalculable. After the battle of the Antietam, men who were wounded before noon on Wednesday lay where they fell till the forenoon of Friday, when our advancing skirmishers found the enemy's positions abandoned.

With these statements and suggestions, we leave for the present this interesting subject.

Our duty as a people to the soldier is plain. The means of knowledge whether we are doing our duty lie within easy reach of all of us. By correspondence, through the press, by personal communication with officers and men, we are in closer relations with our armies than ever people was before. Let us learn the truth about this matter of the ambulance system, and then let us do the best we can for our defenders. Gratitude and justice combine to make the duty imperative.

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